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Shamanic Initiation, Imaginal Worlds, and Light after Death

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The Belief, the knowledge, and even the experience that our physical world of the senses is a mere illusion, a world of shadows, and that the three-dimensional tool we call our body serves only as a container or dwelling place for Something infinitely greater and more comprehensive than the body and which constitutes the matrix or real life- this surely is the most powerful idea man has ever conceived.

Holger Kalweit

Anyone who becomes familiar with the phenomena of near-death experiences (NDEs) must inevitably think about life after death. No matter that we NDE researchers have been virtually unanimous in insisting that these experiences do not and cannot prove the existence of an afterlife. Despite our careful disclaimers, to say nothing of the cold water of skeptics' outright denials, the implied promise of the NDE continues to exert a pervasive and powerful appeal. Indeed, everyone, critics included, understands that the reason many moderns have become fascinated with NDEs is not simply that they suggest that the moment of death is none of stupendous splendor and joy beyond reckoning. No – it is rather the unmistakable implication that this kind of experience *continues* that there really is a life after death and that, furthermore, it will be wonderful.

Surely, underneath it all, this is why the NDE, as soon as it was publicized through the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Raymond Moody, stirred the public imagination through the Western world and why the NDE persists as a topic of widespread interest today. Clearly, reports of NDEs point an enormously attractive picture of the entrance hall into the house of death, making people hopeful that they, too, will dwell in its luminous and loving interior for all time, surrounded by those whom they cherish and revere. Regardless of how justifiable such hopes may seem, no one can deny that they are what sells books and tabloids that feature guests describing their encounters with death.

Of course, we in the West have traditionally nurtured such hopes – or at least we long did so until the ascent of science and the corresponding decline of religious sensibility made them appear to be unfashionable and insupportable anachronisms. Obviously, the idea of life after death no longer fits with our postmodern, secular view of things. And yet, ironically enough, we now find that right out of the womb of medical science itself, with its power to restore seemingly lost lives, these hopes have been born anew with the emergence of the NDE as a subject of serious scientific research. No wonder people are simultaneously disturbed and enthralled by this phenomenon, which is reviving thoughts about life after death that most of us had assumed were *themselves* dead for keeps.

Thus, the NDE is not only an experience of riveting fascination; it is also potentially an extremely *subversive* one, threatening to undermine our hard-won secular scientific worldview. Hence, the urgency in some quarters either to explain away or lampoon this phenomenon: Either way, we won't have to take it seriously and we can go back to our more or less materialistic view of life. Of course, in other quarters there is exactly the *opposite* tendency- that is, to embrace the NDE and accept its implications for life after death quite literally.

My own approach to this matter, however, is to advocate a third response. Suppose for the moment that we take neither the side of the skeptic nor that of the partisan. Instead, let us examine the NDE in a context that doesn't require us to accept *or* reject it, but only to try to see it clearly for what it is. To do so, we need to view the NDE in a light that will for the time being strip from it all connotations of life after death. In this pursuit, we will be well guided, I think, by following the shaman's touch.

A Shamanic Approach to NDE

In traditional tribal societies, the shaman is what we might call “a doctor of the soul.” He or she typically come to this calling either because of some unusual personal characteristics or by virtue of having survived an ordeal of some kind. So, for example, many shamans as youths are marked by psychic sensitivities or by a history of epilepsy. They tend from the start to be odd, eccentric, or different from others in some way. Or, not infrequently, they have survived a life-threatening illness that has profoundly transformed them. The Lakota medicine man Black Elk is a famous instance of someone who took this route to a shamanic career.

In any even, through either inadvertent personal experience or deliberate shamanic training, shamans normally go through an initiation that ritually confirms them in their societal role. Ordinarily, such an initiation begins by separating the apprentice shaman from his community so that he can be put into the hands of his shamanic teachers. The initiate is then required to undergo various ordeals, both physical and psychological, as the training progresses. Often, as is well known, these rites involved powerful motifs of dismemberment and reconstitution as the candidate endures the ultimate trial of death and rebirth—a necessary component for all true initiations, as well as the experiential foundation for a new sense of identity as a shaman. And from the candidate’s point of view, his continued physical existence is by no means assured, as the following passage makes clear:

The shaman’s is an ego death that may miss real death by no more than a hair’s breadth. We are not referring here to a mytho-poetic imagination of death in the form of allegories and archetypes. The death experience of the shaman is a dangerous walk on a tightrope between this world and the Beyond. It is not a hallucinatory pseudovision of death.

Sacred mysteries are vouchsafed to the individual as he learns to enter into otherworldly realms and acquires his particular shamanic skills, power animals, sacred songs, secret languages, and so forth. After his initiation is complete, he returns, following a period of readjustment and assimilation, to his community. He is now prepared to become a healer, a pschopomp, a “master of ecstasy” (the phrase is Mircea Eliade’s), a mystic, a visionary. In brief, the shaman is a man (or woman) who knows how to live in two worlds: the world of the soul and the world of the body. And though indispensable to the welfare of his tribe, he often

remains somewhat apart from it, precisely because of his special knowledge and his sometimes disturbing presence.

To see how these initiatory strands are woven together into the fabric of an actual shamanic ritual, consider the procedure followed by Arunta—an aboriginal people of Australia made familiar to generations of anthropologists through the work of Baldwin Spencer and F. Gillen—around the turn of the century.

Among the Australian Arunta the person destined to become a medicine man seeks out a cave inhabited by the Iruntarinia, the spirits of the ancestors who lived in Alcheringa, the Dreamtime. He lies down at the mouth of the cave and sleeps until one of the spirits appears, piercing him with a spear through the back of the neck until the spear emerges at the mouth, perforating the tongue. The perforation of the tongue does not heal and is accepted as a physical sign of a medicine man. How the hole in the tongue comes about is unclear, but in any case it is big enough to put one's little finger through it. The spirit ancestor then pierces the head of the initiate with a second spear, sideways from ear to ear.

The initiate is taken into the cave, where the Iruntarinia operate on his body, taking out the organs and replacing them with new ones. He awakens in a state of madness, but this disturbed state does not last very long. He is returned to his tribe by the ancestors and thereafter has the gift of seeing the spirits...

During the sacred Dreamtime, the material limitations and physical restrictions of ordinary people do not exist. The novice returns to his primordial state by contacting the spirits of the ancestors. He thus gets a taste of the sacred nature of being, of a timeless age, accessible to anyone who knows how to open himself to it. To be in the company of the ancestral spirits is an experience of such transcendental force that it could be said to be tantamount to death or self-annihilation.

Upon his return to this world, the novice is mentally disturbed and has difficulty readjusting to his human environment. Catapulted out of sacred space, he gets the standards of earthly life all muddled up and only gradually succeeds in reassembling this nonsensical mosaic. He enters our world from the timeless world of the "eternal now" where the space/time continuum is [again] magically present. He is therefore unsure of himself and behaves in a socially and mentally abnormal manner. Yet this is the way a medicine man is born. The sacred Dreamtime has turned a man into a healer.

During his initiation—and of course many times thereafter—the shaman goes on a journey in which he enters into a transcendental world beyond time and space and returns to his physical world transformed and imbued with new knowledge. As students of shamanism and religion have already begun to observe, such shamanic journeys often have substantial

phenomenological overlap with NDEs. Indeed, I submit that no one acquainted with the literature of both shamanism and NDEs could fail to see that there are many connections between these two categories of experience.

Hence, the implication is clear: By coming close to death, the NDEer has inadvertently and involuntarily been initiated into a shamanic journey. According to this view, then, NDEers are modern shamans, and the NDE itself may be understood to be a classic form of shamanic initiation. In summary, the NDE is in its form and dynamics, essentially a shamanic experience – whether the NDEer realizes it or not.

But having pointed out the commonalities between these two types of experiences, it is also crucial to note their differences. Whereas the effect of the NDE is to introduce the individual to the mysteries of death, the shaman, as a result of his training, has become, in Kalweit's words, "a master of death." That is, he is someone who, unlike the NDEer, can enter into- and leave- the world of death at will and can therefore provide us with something of a map of the postmortem terrain whose contours can be only briefly glimpsed by the NDEer. For this supreme accomplishment, shamans, everywhere their kind is recognized, are according the highest stature among men:

As a Chosen One, as someone who, during his own lifetime, succeeds in penetrating the frontiers of transcendence, the shaman moves as a messenger between two worlds- the world of living humanity and the world of the dead or of nonmaterial existence. He is a hero who overcomes supernatural dangers and, as such, is celebrated in the tradition of the people, immortalized in their myths and epic poems. The shaman transcends the profane order of existence, leaves the world of the banal and travels to an etheric subtle sphere *accessible to ordinary people only in death or as result of serious illness, accident, shock, violent emotions, and in dreams*. This conscious and controlled penetration into such a closed realm must be counted among the greatest achievements of Man. This is the reason why shamans are respected and honored wherever they practice their art.

Thus, it is the shaman, rather than the NDEer, whose torch illuminates most revealingly the realm beyond death. And therefore, to peer into we must not only continue to follow in the light of this torch, but learn to see with a shaman's eye – with the true "vision not of this world."

Imaginal Vision

By taking this shamanic perspective, we can appreciate that the plane of experience NDEers enter into during their near-death crisis is the same one that shamans learn to access freely during the course of their training. Therefore, strictly speaking, this realm is not one that awaits us only after death. It exists now and is in principle available in Life to anyone who has learned the “access code.”

And here is the second important lesson we can derive from this shamanic perspective: how to enter this world at will. The key to such entrance is surprisingly simple to state in words, although certainly not always easy to effect I practice. It all turns out to hinge on the imagination – through what I mean by this term is not what is commonly understood by it. Accordingly, let us take a moment to look at this familiar idea, the imagination, more closely in order to see how it actually holds the key to the door of the so-called afterlife.

In the West, with the notable exception of certain champions of the imagination such as Coleridge, we have tended to use this term in a somewhat pejorative way to signify something “made up,” or, in short, a fantasy of some kind. Certainly, there is usually the implication that the realm of the imagination is not truly real, as in the common phrase “That’s just your imagination.” In part, this view is a direct legacy of an outmoded Cartesian dualism that forces us to choose between the conceptual categories of mind and matter and has, with the rise of science, given ontological priority to the latter.

But perhaps there is, after all, a third realm- the realm of the imagination *sui generis*, not as something unreal, but as something objectively self-existent, the cumulative product of imaginative thought itself. Indeed, this is a point of view that has been advanced within the past fifteen years by many scholars representing such field as a religious studies, mythology, psychology, shamanic studies, ufology, and NDE research. Much of this work has been predicated on a now-classic distinction between the imaginary and the imaginal, originally proposed by the great French Islamic scholar Henri Corbin in 1972. This distinction is not only important; it is, I believe, absolutely fundamental to any formulation that seeks to shed light on the nature of the NDE and on what kind of a “life” we may expect after death. To follow Corbin’s argument, we need to start with his concept of the imaginal.

First of all, in dealing with things of the imaginal realm, we are not talking about the stuff of fantasy, or even of imagination, as these terms are generally used today. Specifically, we are not concerned here with fictive matters or with what is ‘made up’ through creative invention. Instead, the imaginal refers to a third kingdom, access to which is dependent neither on sensory perception nor on ordinary cognition (including fantasy). Normally hidden, it can be apprehended in what we would today call certain altered states of consciousness that destabilize ordinary perceptual modalities and cognitive systems. When these are sufficiently disturbed, the imaginal realm, like the night sky that can be discerned only when sunlight is absent, stands revealed.

The most important attribute of the imaginal realm, however, is that it is ontologically real. According to Corbin, who as a deep student of mystical and especially visionary experience,

it must be understood that the world into which these [visionaries] probed is perfectly real. Its reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than that of the empirical world, where reality is perceived by the senses. Upon returning, the beholders of this world are perfectly aware of having been “elsewhere”; they are not mere schizophrenics. This world is hidden behind the very act of sense perception and has to be sought underneath its apparent objective certainty. For this reason we definitely cannot qualify it as being imaginary in the current sense of the word, i.e., as unreal, or nonexistent...[The imaginal] world...is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect...We must be careful not to confuse it with imagination identified by so-called modern man with “fantasy”

Not only is the imaginal realm ontologically real, it is also a world that has form, dimension, and most important for us, persons. Corbin suggests this when he writes:

[This is] a world possessing extension and dimension, figures and colors; but these features cannot be perceived by the senses in the same manner as if they were properties of physical bodies. No, these dimensions, figures, and colors are the object of imaginative perception, or of the “psychospiritual senses.”

In summary, imagination in Corbin's sense is actually, as Coleridge claimed, a creative power and should be understood as a kind of "organ of perception" in its own right –what the alchemists called *imaginatio vera* (true imagination). And the world that is disclosed is, as Blake new, a supersensible reality that can be directly apprehended.

We are beginning to see now with a shaman's eye, with imaginal vision. But before we can understand what it is we are seeing, we need to pause to consider and examine the next step –a pivotal one –in the logic of this imaginal journey.

Just what is seen when one views with the eye of the imagination? What Corbin suggests is that we see our own inner spiritual state, transformed and projected outward into a seemingly objective external vision. In other words, what we are looking at –as well as with –is our soul.

Indeed, should and imagination are indissolubly bound to each other in this kind of formulation. Virtually all scholars who have come to view imagination in Corbinesque terms have found themselves back, as it were, with Heraclitus, having to give primacy to the soul and having to acknowledge, with Aristotle, that the natural language of the should is the image. Robert Avens, for instance concluded his brilliant essay on imagination with the assertion that should is imagination and that it is, in the end, our absolute ontological bedrock: "only soul (the imaginal realm) is not reducible to anything else and so constitutes our true, ontological reality."

Corbin's argument leads us to the threshold of death itself, for he goes on to tell us that imagination is ultimately a purely spiritual faculty, independent of the physical body, and is accordingly

able to exist after the latter has disappeared... The soul is also independent as to its imaginative capacity and its imaginative activity. Moreover, when it is separated from this world it can continue to avail itself of active imagination...After this separation all the soul's powers are assembled and concentrated in the sole faculty of active imagination.

Light after Death

At death, then, we are released into the imagination, the creative expression of our soul no longer yoked to our physical body. And what we see –as though external to us –is the soul's own image.

What we see is light. Light, the souls own effulgence, incomparably radiant, splendid, primordial and unconditioned. This light is both symbol and apogee of the NDE, as we know, and it is the universally recognized expression of our divine core manifesting itself in spiritual experience. The light is one's pure soul essence, undefiled by human character, though the way in which the light presents itself (its hue, brightness, etc.) does seem to reflect the state of one's soul –the “real you inside,” as NDEers tend to put it.

This primordial light is then refracted through the prism of the soul so that it yields a world of images – an imaginal world.

The environment of the life between life is a reflection of each person's thought forms and expectations. The Tibetan Book of the Dead asserts repeatedly that the bardo dweller produces his own surrounding from the contents of his mind. Rudolf Striener maintained that thoughts and mental images of our inner realm appear to us after death as our external world. “After death,” he said, “all our thoughts and mental representations appear as a mighty panorama before the soul.”

And here unfolds that familiar succession of hyperreal images that collectively defines “the otherworld journey,” the first stages of which NDEers have described so often, consistently, and convincingly. These accounts, which at least in their broad outlines (and allowing for local variations from culture to culture) seem remarkable congruent, might naively be thought to represent some kind of uniformity of postmortem geography. But from an imaginal understanding, this apparent consistency has less to do with any actual topological uniformity of an after-death realm than with the universality of the human soul. Clearly, if there is any merit to this perspective, it is not that we “go to a place” after death; instead, we enter a state of consciousness where images are our reality and where that reality, which is not entirely fixed, is responsive to the thoughts, expectations, and desires of our souls.

To see this from another angle, let us return to our earlier context of shamanism, for it is the shaman, once again, who sees most penetratingly here. Compare, for example, this passage from our chief expositor of shamanic vision, Holger Kaweit, with what we have already heard from Corbin:

The geography of the Beyond portrayed [here] should not be seen as a naïve description of other landscapes . . . but as an attempt to make the Surviving consciousness aware of the fact that it itself constitutes the world of the beyond . .

There is no realm of death as such. Instead the Beyond consists of all those properties particular to our consciousness once it is independent from the body.

The shaman, whom modern research has shown to be a person extraordinarily gifted in his imaginative proclivities and whose training further strengthens those talents, is someone who has learned to see with the eyes of the soul. Thus, while fully alive, he has already entered into what most ordinary persons will encounter only when their mortality is upon them. This is precisely because the imagination of the shaman –his *imaginatio vera* –has been completely awakened.

Of course, the soul's journey after death eventually must depart from the common story line we know so well from our NDE narratives. That story begins, as we have seen, with the pure lights of the soul's unconditioned divine splendor, follows the lineaments of its universal form, and must of necessity devolve into the particularities of each soul's perfectly appropriate but highly individualized imaginal world. IN the face of such imaginal diversity, we must turn our attention elsewhere.

I suggest that we return it to this world, because though we meet our soul in "the next world," we make it in this one. And "making soul" (the phrase come from Keats), as opposed to seeing the soul's essence after death, is after all what life requires of us.

In contemplating this task, however, it will behoove us to realize that what the shaman has achieved through the ordeals of his own training, we too may learn through other means.

Implications for the Question of Survival

Paracelsus wrote: "Everyone may educate and regulate his imagination so as to come thereby into contact with spirits, and be taught by them."

Having acknowledged that the subtextual appeal of near-death narratives is their implied promise of a glorious afterlife, I cannot refrain from observing that in my personal opinion this lure of the NDE may also prove to be dangerous distraction. The enormous publicity that these reports have received, and the hope they inspire about a life to come, may well seduce many persons into an attitude of comfortable complacency. The light appears to shine on all with its unconditionally accepting radiance, and everyone seems to enter eternity in an atmosphere of all-pervasive pure love that reveals the soul in its blessed immanent divinity

Or so these accounts of what awaits us a death tempt us to believe. And I, for one, do believe it. Still, we must not, I think, allow the light of the NDE to blind us to the rest of the imaginal journey to follow. To emphasize only the light, or to suppose that it will, in itself, make all things well after death, regardless of how we have lived, is in my judgment a naïve and fallacious reading of the implications of NDE research.

Even Black, who is perhaps the preeminent poet of the NDE and certainly the still-towering seer of the visionary imagination, held that it was possible to fall off “the golden track” into true death. And likewise, we remember Plato’s assertion that the whole purpose of philosophy was to provide “a rehearsal for death” –that is, a means by which to engage in a form of soul training whose consummate value would be fully evident only after death.

These are the voices from history that rise above the noisy clamor of today’s NDE enthusiasts and critics alike, reminding us that we are at this very moment writing the script for our own after-death imaginal drama and that we ourselves are the shapers for our soul’s destiny. The light may indeed reflect our true nature and dissolve our personal sense of sin, but it can never absolve us of the responsibility for our own lives. Not just what we are in our essence, but how we have in fact lived will be evident – perhaps painfully so –after death. For there, what was subjective becomes imaginably objective: What we see is a representation of what we have been in the depths of our psyche.

This may sound like a sermon on the virtues of the moral life, but I have something very different in mind in making these remarks. Everything I’ve said here points to the primacy of the soul as the vehicle of the imaginative life. Soul and imagination are inseparable. To “build soul” is to cultivate the imagination. And, as Terence McKenna, Blake’s space-age successor and an ardent advocate and practitioner of modern shamanism, has observed, “the imagination is everything . . . This is where we came from. This is where we are going.” Thus, to enter into the imagination before we die is to know both our source and our destiny. It is also to practice the shaman’s art and Plato’s philosophy so as to see with imaginal vision while still alive.

For me, the true promise of the NDE is not what it suggests about life after death, but what it says about how to live now and how to wake up to the divine imagination now by following the soul’s passionate yearning

to experience its boundless depths before death. Who better than Kabir to remind us how?

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think . . . and think . . . while you are alive.
What you call “salvation” belongs to the time before death.

If you don’t break your ropes while you’re alive,
do you think
Ghosts will do it after?

The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten-
that is all fantasy.

What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment
in the City of Death.

If you make love with the divine now, in the next life
you will have the face of satisfied desire.
So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,
Believe in the Great Sound!

Kabir say this: When the Guest is being searched for,
it is the intensity of the longing that does all the work.
Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.